



Family relationships in crisis situations.

Elizabeth's Wish


by Vincent Daley

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A young girl with brown hair, wearing a pink hospital gown, is lying in a white hospital bed. She is looking out a window at a dark night sky filled with stars. A bright shooting star streaks across the sky. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window and the hospital room's ambient lighting.

*Elizabeth's
Wish*

Vince Daley

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A Novel

Vince Daley

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First Edition

To: Millie

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	vii
Chapter One - The Gathering	1
Chapter Two - At Long Last A Vacation	7
Chapter Three - Making a Wish	15
Chapter Four - The Homecoming.....	20
Chapter Five - Murphy’s Law Prevails	25
Chapter Six - The Truth Will Free You.....	31
Chapter Seven - A To Do List Followed By A Speedy Sayonara....	40
Chapter Eight - Things Are Looking Up.....	49
Chapter Nine - Vacations on the Family Plan	56
Chapter Ten - The Curtain Begins to Fall	65
Chapter Eleven - You’re Trying to Panic Everyone.....	68
Chapter Twelve - Thanksgiving Comes and Goes	75
Chapter Thirteen - Death Doesn’t Take A Holiday.....	81
Chapter Fourteen - A Wish Comes True	86
Chapter Fifteen - Requiem	90
Epilogue.....	95
About The Author.....	99

Prologue

One of the favorite topics of writers is family relationships. Whether it be “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” by Tennessee Williams or Pat Conroy’s “The Great Santini” and “The Prince of Tides” or Arthur Miller’s “All My Sons”, those relationships that have their birth in childhood and their maturity in adulthood, seem to be the most difficult to deal with. Some writers, however, as talented as they may be, will tell you straight away that their own family events are too close to them personally for them to deal with in their work. A friend of mine who has produced several plays, is a talented screen writer, and has produced a number of documentaries, once recounted what I thought was a hilarious sequence of events dealing with his brother’s new wife and his family at a Christmas celebration. Interestingly enough, he shared the story with me because we had been discussing the subject of dysfunctional families and he wanted to illustrate the fact that those types of situations are the most difficult to deal with, even for a talented writer. He went a step further and indicated that, if you are so bold as to write about your family, dysfunctional as it might seem to be, the incident that you recounted would have to be portrayed as being well beyond the limits of the real event. Having done that, your own family members should be able to look at what you have portrayed and say, “Look, it’s like our family only much worse.” I found his perspective on the subject of writing about dysfunctional families to be both interesting and challenging.

When I asked him why he didn’t use the family event he had described to me in a play, he just shook his head and said, “No, it’s my family. It’s too close to my heart.” Realizing that I had encroached upon “sacred ground”, I tried to lighten the mood a bit by responding, “Steve, I think it’s hilarious. Would

you mind if I used it?” Unfortunately, my attempt at humor did not have the desired effect and he merely grimaced instead of smiling.

Each of those authors who have chosen to deal with this type of subject matter, ultimately present us with an object lesson or moral to be derived from the story. Williams would say, “A family crisis brings out the best and the worst in family members” while Conroy would suggest that, “There are no crimes within families that are beyond forgiveness.” In that respect, perhaps, “Elizabeth’s Wish” may fall short. It recounts a series of family events, certainly from the perspective of the writer, and leaves it to the reader to decide who, if anyone is right or wrong. It does not overtly fix blame or, for that matter, applaud any of the players. And, perhaps, at the end of the day, in recounting this story, the writer is seeking only to place a bandage on an open wound that has never fully healed. Perhaps, there is no right or wrong to be found within the framework of the events of this story. Maybe, we are simply observing a group of people enmeshed in a “family crisis”, hopefully with the best of intentions, making decisions that that they believe are the right ones. My mother used to have a saying, among the many that those of Irish descent are prone to have, “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.” Having said all that, I’ve still taken it upon myself to tread upon the “sacred ground” of family events and tell a story which is clearly fictional but still based upon some actual events. As close as something may be to your heart, sometimes the story must still be told, and I will leave it to the reader to assess the merits of both the story and the characters in the story.

Chapter One

The Gathering

The Callahan house is a modest cape cod situated on the south shore of Long Island. Joseph and Elizabeth Callahan have lived in the house for forty years and raised six children within its walls. The house had been built by Joe Callahan and his brother-in-law Bobby Donovan shortly after the end of World War II at the urging, and some might say under the coercion, of Elizabeth Callahan. It was certainly built out of necessity and perhaps love as well, during those difficult years after the war when affordable housing was scarce. Joe Callahan was a white-collared worker then while Bobby was pure blue-collared. What they did have in common was a liking for a cold beer or two followed by lively discussions on a variety of subjects. After imbibing a few, Bobby was inclined to wax eloquently on many topics. At least one topic was of most pressing interest to Elizabeth Callahan. One of Bobby's favorite subjects was just how easy it was to build a house. It was not a subject that Elizabeth really wanted to hear about within the context of a six-pack of beer. At the time both the Callahan and the Donovan families were living in rented homes. In addition, the Callahan's were faced with the prospect of having to move at the request of a landlord who wanted to renovate the property and eventually increase the rent during this post-war period of high demand for housing.

It was on one of those evenings that Elizabeth grew tired of listening to the beer-inspired talk about how easy it was to build a house, that she sprung her trap, "It's so damned easy? Then do it." Knowing his wife's intensity and strength of will, Joe Callahan tried to backpedal quickly but it was too late. Bobby, not realizing that he'd been had, continued to insist at a

slighter higher volume, that it was no big deal. All you had to do was dig a hole, build a foundation and frame it out.

With those “words of wisdom” offered by Bobby Donovan, they were off and running. Elizabeth and her younger sister had each squirreled away enough money to buy two building lots which they then used as collateral for building loans. Working evenings and weekends and with the addition of family help on the weekends, the Callahan house rose to completion within a year. Almost one year to the day, the Donovan house was finished as well. At that point both families settled in for the long haul of raising their families in their newly-constructed homes. The standard joke in the Callahan house for many years thereafter was that when the houses were finally completed, Joe threw down his hammer and never picked it up again.

Looking back on it many years later, some members of Joe Callahan’s family, but not all, were certainly amazed at the herculean nature of this feat. That two men, so different in temperament, skills, and age could have accomplished such a feat is hard to imagine in today’s world. Joe Callahan was a white-collared worker in his late thirties who had never wielded a hammer or turned a serious wrench in his life when their tortuous journey began. His brother-in-law was a relatively skilled blue-collared worker, a full ten years younger than his reluctant cohort, who had never met a tool that he didn’t like. It was most assuredly not a match made in heaven but one that ultimately resulted in success.

Although there were three large windows on the front wall, and two smaller ones on a side wall, the living room in the Callahan house always looked dark and gloomy. Perhaps it was the heavy drapes that tended to dominate the sheer white

curtains on each group of windows. Joseph Callahan is seated in a well-worn armchair with an equally well-worn hassock in front of it, upon which he rests both of his feet. The rest of the room is furnished with almost shabby furniture that has clearly seen better days. Included are a sofa, a loveseat, and a circular coffee table covered with magazines, newspapers, and one or two hardcover books. Joe is a man who always seemed to be at ease. Over the years, his family has grown used to watching him sit in that chair, puffing on his pipe and reading a newspaper, oblivious to the bright red sparks that fluttered from his pipe, burning small holes in his flannel shirt. He has been known to be so serious a smoker that he could smoke a hole thru the bottom of a pipe, never realizing that he was now puffing on burning briar rather than tobacco. He had smoked a pipe for almost fifty years and had only given it up ten years earlier at the age of seventy when his wife Elizabeth had begun to suffer from emphysema.

On this particular day four of his six children surround him in his living room. Two of his children, Michael and William Callahan, are not present. His oldest son, John, a slender man in his late forties with dark, straight hair and a full but neatly trimmed moustache is one who is there. He is nattily dressed in a long-sleeved mock turtle-necked cotton shirt and smokes a cigarette as he paces the room nervously. His brother, Brian, is about five years younger and, although about the same height, is much thicker in build with straight sandy-colored hair. He sits casually on a loveseat to the right of his father with one leg crossed over the other. Ann Schmidt, his older sister, is a woman of medium build but on the short side, with strawberry blonde hair that is closely cut. She is a neatly attired woman in her mid-forties. Her younger sister Laura Hansen is shorter yet and a bit heavier in build with shoulder length blonde hair. She

is dressed casually in jeans and a sweatshirt. Both sisters sit on the sofa to the left of their father, but, while Laura appears to be relatively relaxed, Ann looks a bit agitated and continues to wring her hands, nervously.

Brian speaks first and announces authoritatively, “I’m going to call them. Michael should be here.” His father makes a pained face and says, “Why are you going to call them? What are they going to be able to do here? Leave them alone. They need a vacation. After all that has happened, Bernadette in particular, needs to get away and enjoy herself.”

Ann stands, continuing to wring her hands, and looking at no one in particular but rather at a point on the wall above all their heads and, as sincerely as possible, adds, “Well, I don’t want to tell you what to do but it is his mother that we are talking about. If it were me, I would want to be here, vacation or no vacation.”

Laura scowls and looks at her sister as if she has just said something incredibly ridiculous, “Ann, there’s no way that you or anyone else in this room would cancel their vacation and come back for this. You know it and I know it. Leave them alone.”

Ann looks unconvinced and a bit hurt by the directness of her sister’s statement. Once again she picks a point high on the wall and responds, “I’m sorry but I don’t think that’s true at all.”

John continues to pace and throws both hands up in the air, somewhat flippantly. He’s clearly a man who doesn’t want to make the final decision. The action with his hands and his

words suggest that it's not a big deal either way, however, he does not appear to want to be the one who says do it or don't do it, "Brian, if you want to call them, just go ahead and call them. Why shouldn't you?" He continues to pace, obviously feeling that he has done his part by supporting his brother's proposed action without having to commit to doing it himself.

Joseph Callahan maintains the pained look on his face and shakes his head back and forth but makes no overt move to stop his son from making the call, "Fine! Fine! Do whatever you want."

He also feels that he has done his part by objecting half-heartedly to his son's insistence on making the call. He is also a man who has spent his life raising half-hearted objections to proposed actions, even more so as he grows older, but still never seeming to object in a serious fashion. It's almost as if he is saying, "It's out of my hands. I've done all that I can by objecting to the proposal." In this manner, he shunts the responsibility for an unpleasant task to one or more of his children.

Brian's perspective and his demeanor are quite different from those of his sister and older brother. His view is relatively simple. He is convinced that he knows exactly what should be done in a given situation and, more importantly, he wants to be the one who directs that particular action. If necessary, he will do it himself. It isn't really important as to who does it. It is only important that the action that he recommends be undertaken. The act or action is less important than his ability to decide what action should be undertaken and to insist that it be done.

Laura, in many respects, is more of a neutral party. She would rather that they not call her brother Michael while he and his family are on vacation but she's not going to knock herself out over it. If they insist on contacting him, so be it. She might think that it's the wrong thing to do and that her brother Brian is full of shit but she's not going to waste too much time or effort on trying to convince them of that. For that reason she remains the "wild card" in the group and it is always tough to figure out on which side of any argument she will fall.

For a group of children who grew up in relatively close quarters, they all are distinctively different. Each appears to have his or her own role in the group dynamic and each plays his or her part to the hilt. Presumably, Joseph Callahan knows this but he's tough to figure as well.

Brian stands and says, "I'm going to call him."

Joseph Callahan and his daughter Laura each grimace but neither one says anything.

John shrugs, throws both hands in the air and says, "Call him. If you want to call him, go ahead and call."

Ann wrings her hands, nods affirmatively and chimes in with, "I think it's the right thing to do."

Brian crosses the room to a small table in the corner of the adjoining dining room looking back at his father and asks, "Where's the number? Is it on the table? Okay, I've got it." He picks up the phone and begins to dial.

Chapter Two

At Long Last A Vacation

It had been a long and difficult year for Bernadette and Michael Callahan when they finally decided to take their children to Disneyland in Orlando, Florida. Unfortunately, Bernadette's younger brother had passed away suddenly in a traffic accident a few months earlier and the strain of thirteen years of marriage spent dealing with the various problems associated with Michael's parents and younger brother William seemed finally to have caught up with them. They were both very tired and ready to get away for a while. The fact that they had decided to make the trip in July was also not the wisest of moves, given the prevailing afternoon temperatures in Florida at that time of year, but they were both convinced that if they did not make the trip then there was no telling when they would have another opportunity.

They had flown to Orlando and then rented a car to drive to their hotel in Lake Buena Vista. The car had proven to be unnecessary as they rode the shuttle every morning from the Sheraton to either Disneyland itself or to Epcot Center. On the first morning everyone was relaxed and seated on the shuttle as the huge globe that enclosed the ride "This Planet Earth" came into view. Their nine-year old son, Andrew, had leaped to his feet shouting, "There it is" to the amusement of all on the shuttle although a few startled elderly couples almost leapt to their feet as well. For the rest of the week, they would attend all the attractions in the morning, return to the hotel for lunch and an afternoon dip in the pool before dressing and having dinner at one of the local restaurants or in Epcot Center.

The door to their hotel room opens suddenly and the two children rush in, laughing and followed closely by Michael Callahan. The young girl is about ten and the boy a year or two younger. The children jump on the nearest of two double beds and Michael jumps on the bed behind them wrestling and tickling the two of them. All three are laughing hysterically as Bernadette Callahan comes thru the door with an exasperated look on her face but laughing as well as she watches her husband playing with the children. As difficult as the year has been she is happy to see her husband and her children relaxed and enjoying themselves.

They have been married for thirteen years but most of that time has been spent dealing with family problems, particularly those problems associated with Michael's family. They have been the closest to his parents from a geographical and, to a certain extent, emotional perspective. All of Michael's brothers and sisters live out of state and one resides out of country. His brother William lives in an institution for the mentally disabled and it has fallen to Michael and Bernadette to deal with whatever family crisis might arise periodically. Her family members are all close to one another, geographically, and the responsibility for helping her parents, should it be necessary, has been more or less a shared one. In many ways their marriage and life has not been their own. There are certainly "givers" and "takers" in life but by Bernadette's count, there are a lot more "takers" than "givers", especially, when it comes to giving up your personal time to help someone else.

To make matters worse, the trauma of Bernadette having lost her younger brother earlier in the year had simply added one more brick to the load. When Michael had suggested that they take a vacation in Florida close to Disneyland, she had

jumped all over the idea. It was certainly something that was long overdue and almost necessary to prevent her nerves from totaling unraveling. Even as all this passes quickly thru her mind, the phone rings and she has the sense of another impending family disaster.

Michael answers the phone and from his response Bernadette can tell that it is his younger brother Brian. She also knows instinctively that this is trouble once again and that their peaceful vacation is about to end. She thinks to herself, "It really was too good to last." She listens to her husband's side of the conversation, "Brian, what's happening? Where are you? Are you back in the states?"

Without really answering Michael's questions completely, Brian responds, "I'm in New York at Mother and Dad's house. John, Ann, and Laura are here as well. Ann drove down earlier this week and John and Laura flew in yesterday. I think you should come home right away."

Although somewhat taken aback by Brian's matter of fact statement about returning to New York immediately, Michael is clearly worried now, "What is it? What's going on?"

Brian answers in a short and insistent manner, "It's Mother. She's in the hospital and scheduled for surgery the day after tomorrow. The initial diagnosis is colon cancer and I think you should come back now."

Although he is stunned by news of his mother's impending surgery, Michael tries to control his emotions and keep it on a rational plane, "Is the surgery life threatening? Don't they expect her to come out of it?"

Brian's answer is the first indication that he is actually hedging a bit, "Well, it is serious surgery and although they say she should be okay, who can tell. I just think you should be here."

Michael senses that there is more going on here than his brother is saying and his first thought is Bernadette and his children, "I don't get it. What's the big rush? Her surgery is on Friday. We'll be back in town on Sunday. There are four of you there with Dad now. You guys should be able to handle things until I get back. How's Dad? He's okay, isn't he?"

Not giving any ground and not answering the question about his father, Brian insists to insist, "Well, we just think you should be here."

Michael notes the subtle change in person from "I think you should be here" to "We think you should be here" and asks, "What does Dad say?"

Not being totally truthful, Brian says, "Well, I don't really know what he thinks."

Annoyed now and getting the feeling that he is not getting a straight story, Michael responds quickly, "Let me talk to him."

Brian reluctantly turns the phone over to his father, still not giving any ground, "Okay, but I still think you should come in."

Speaking apologetically, Joe confirms what Michael has already surmised but stretches the truth a little bit, "I told them

not to call you but they were concerned and wanted to let you know what is happening.”

Michael now has a pretty clear picture as to what is going on. His brothers and sisters want him there immediately to take on the pressure and responsibility while letting them off the hook relative to what is happening. He can also see that, ultimately, whatever develops, it will all fall to him and Bernadette. The others will depart for home as soon as they can and he and Bernadette, the closest geographically, will once again have to bear the brunt of the situation.

Nevertheless, he feels for his father and is concerned about his mother, “Dad, if you need me, I’ll come in. I just want to make sure that it is really necessary before I disappoint Bernadette and the kids. Actually, I want to know what you think not what Brian thinks and not what anyone else may want.”

His father answers quickly, “Stay there. We’ll keep you advised. It’ll be fine.”

Michael hangs up without asking to speak to Brian or the others, “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He looks at his wife and sees the concern on her face, “I knew it was too good to last. They think that my mother has cancer. She’s scheduled for surgery on Friday. Brian wants me to fly back right away. Dad told me to stay put.”

Michael shakes his head angrily, “Son of a bitch! It never ends. Every time you and I try to find time for ourselves and the kids, it starts all over again. I’m really sick of it.”

Bernadette says quietly, “Maybe, we should just go back. God forbid if anything were to happen.”

Michael, his face still angry answers quickly, “No! I’m not going to do that. Let someone else step up just once. I want to see one of them inconvenience himself. Do you think Brian or any of the others would interrupt a vacation and return early? That’ll be the day. No! Not this time! We’re going back on Sunday just like we planned. If things change dramatically, if something unexpected happens, that’s another matter.”

Even as her husband insists that they will not interrupt their vacation and return to New York immediately, Bernadette can see the conflict within him as he wrestles with what the right thing to do is. This has been the pattern of their marriage as they both try to do what is right for all parties, a task that she now realizes is impossible.

At that moment, the children run into the room from the bathroom dressed in their swimsuits, “Mommy, we’re changed. Can we go to the pool now?”

Michael feels his anger melt away as Bernadette patiently answers, “Sure, Mommy and Daddy are going to change and we’ll go.”

Back in New York, things are less peaceful as Brian berates his father, “Why did you tell him to stay? He should be here with the rest of us. He’s the one that’s going to be most involved once we all leave. It’ll be up to him.”

His father gives Brian a weary look, “That’s exactly the point. It’s always up to Michael and Bernadette. It’s always on

their back. Let them have some time together. It will be bad enough once they do get back.”

But, Brian is still not ready to give up, “Of course it’s up to them. They’re here. We’re not here. We can’t all be here. I’ve got to be out of here in another week. John, Ann and Laura have to leave soon as well. If we were the ones here, we would take on the responsibility but we’re not. He should be here. He should come back now.”

Ann, looking at the ceiling rather than anyone in particular chimes in as well, “I really don’t want to say anything but I’m surprised that they’re not coming back right away. I would, in a minute.”

Her sister Laura grimaces and looks at her disdainfully, “Yeah, right.”

Ann looks puzzled at her sister’s response, “What?”

John shrugs and says as sincerely as possible, “I’m really surprised. They should come back right away. That’s what all of us would do.”

Joe shakes his head in exasperation as if he’s having a bad dream, “What’s wrong with you people? Have you forgotten that Bernadette lost her brother earlier this year? That in itself is more strain than anyone needs in their lifetime. They need time away. There’s no reason for them to come back early and that’s the end of it.

Brian, still giving no ground, “I still say he should be here.”

John feeling comfortable with the support of Brian and Ann registers his concurrence, “I agree.”

The old man looks at both of his sons almost as if he doesn't recognize them. You had to give him some credit for being able to assess everyone's agenda. It's clear that each person wants to be perceived as having fulfilled his or her basic duty and then beat a hasty retreat to the door. Laura might be the sole exception but she's really not going to waste much time or energy on the issue one way or the other.



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